

Kabir Sen Creating Musical Bonds

By ASHISH KUMAR SEN



Courtesy Kabir Sen

*World revolution uprising
forward movement people are
dying
Peace and progress make it
happen Cali, New York,
London, Athens
Free elections, no corruption,
dictatorships and mass dis-
ruption
Slave labor, no consumption,
peace keeping? A failing
function
The Berlin Wall's a fallen
symbol, war for oil? It's not
that simple
Religious freedom's not easy
either, Sharon or Arafat?
Neither
Nuclear threats cool your jets
concentrate on your coun-
tries' debts
Make a pledge D.C. to
Pyongyang if you want peace
just sing the song man*

Kabir Sen's lyrics reveal a socially conscious young man. But for those familiar with his pedigree, his passion should come as no surprise. The son of Nobel economics prize winner Amartya Sen, Kabir is a rap artist who describes his music as a blend of bass-heavy beats and catchy, soulful melodies.

An independent rapper and producer based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Sen was attracted to hip-hop because it provided him with a medium to exchange ideas. The underlying message of

his songs, he says, is a "respect for others, celebrating differences, exploring the world, expressing opinions, challenging the norm, dealing with pain, the fight for freedom and just being yourself."

His career choice is best explained in his song "Explanation": *I was born to rock mics and write words on paper
Play shows, teach kids, become a beat-maker
I love drums, bass, keys, strings and shakers*

Sen, whose 30th birthday is November 18, has made a conscious effort to target young people through gigs at schools and colleges. These are "a great way to stay in touch with the youth and share my music in front of bigger crowds," he explains. Most of his performances are part of his hip-hop education program, which combines a concert with a progressive educational workshop about the music and culture.

Sen says his love for writing and "freestyling," or lyrical improvisation, got him interested in hip-hop. His album "Peaceful Solutions" has three underlying themes: re-channeling negative energy, celebrating and appreciating life and self-discovery. The title of his other album, "Cultural Confusion," reflects his personal conflict of representing four places: England, the United States, India and Italy.

Although he is a British citizen, Sen says, "I have lived in the U.S.

for two-thirds of my life and feel quite American by this point."

Sen feels that his music and personality have also been shaped by London, in which he spent his first 10 years, before his father began teaching economics and philosophy at Harvard, moving the family to Massachusetts. The Italian connection is through his mother, Eva Colorni, who died when he was eight. As a child he spent each summer in Italy with her family.

Also, he says, his father has been a profound influence. "Even at a fairly young age I would often listen to conversations within my family about justice, freedom, equality and identity." References to some of those concepts are touched on in "Peaceful Solutions," he says.

Amartya Sen has always supported his son's musical aspirations. But Kabir Sen says with a laugh, "I think I might be the only hip-hop artist he's ever heard!"

Does being Amartya Sen's son bring with it a burden of unrealistic expectations? "If there are such unrealistic expectations out there, they are certainly not coming from my father, nor do I feel burdened by them," says Sen. "As a teacher, musician and hip-hop artist, I set high expectations for myself, because I am an ambitious person with a lot on my plate."

His musical inspirations span a wide range—from the Beatles and U2, to Ravi Shankar and Duke

Ellington. "There are many, many more," he confesses.

His music also reflects a strong Indian influence. His grandmother bought him a tabla when he was about 14, which opened his mind to music that he knew very little about. Around this time he started to listen to a lot of Ravi Shankar, Zakir Hussain, Ali Akbar Khan and Shakti. In college at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, he studied South Indian vocal music for three years with the late T. Viswanathan. "All of these experiences have influenced my music," Sen says. This is evident from his songs "Millennium Travels," "Rise" and "A Better Tomorrow."

His fondest memories are of the times he spent with his family, visiting his grandmother Amita Sen in Santiniketan. "She passed away last year but lived an amazing life," he says. With his grandmother and father among many sources of inspiration, Sen attempts to affect his world through thought-provoking music, as he sings in "Answers": *Brutality and executions justified as retribution
Spreading hate like raw pollution sanctioned by our institutions
So what do we do? Here's one solution:
We start our own mental revolution.*



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